

ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CRITICAL TEXT

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In the perspective of renewal of the methodology of the humanities (and, specifically, linguistic and literary science), we urgently need a comprehensive review of the accepted criteria for the edition of medieval Slavic texts, if we wish to prevent our discipline from becoming restricted to the role of a valuable but useless relic and our work to strictly editorial functions. Therefore I propose a number of reflections on three topics which I consider essential: (1) the distinction of the history of the work and the tradition of the text, (2) the editorial criteria, (3) the significance of the critical edition.

History vs. Tradition of the Text

The problem of the variability of a text, more specifically a text subject to change in the course of its history, has become the main focus of philological activity, as it concerns not only medieval and modern literature (with the slightly different problem of author's variants), but in part classical literature as well. The task of philology is to understand and interpret all texts; thus, at least in principle, the result of the author's will and subsequent modifications are equal in importance. The important point is only not to confuse the history of the work with the tradition of the text and to make a clear distinction between an *open tradition*, i.e. successive versions of a given work, and a *closed tradition*, i.e. copies going back to a single text (the concepts have been well defined by Riccardo Picchio).

As far as I know, it is hard to find a work where each and every copy represents an independent version. Thus, elements of the *closed tradition* are to be found within the *open tradition*: generally speaking, a copyist, rather than modifying the text, endeavors to transmit it.

Of course, even if that is the case, none of the copies are identical, for they are products of human activity, and no two such products (even if made by one and the same individual) are completely identical, the less so, the more time they require. Of course, the massive variation we frequently encounter in the copies is due to the great chronological and geographical distance over which medieval Slavic texts were transmitted.

Thus, the editor is faced with a most delicate problem, namely how to distinguish the two types of tradition: where does the creative element end and the conservative element begin? Or, in other words, how to establish which of the copies belongs to a given version? It is thought that if the body of variants does not affect the essence and individuality of the text, we are dealing with a *closed tradition*, i.e. a text being preserved; conversely, if tone and character of the text are modified, we are dealing with a new version.

No matter how clear and precise the definition above is from a theoretical point of view, in practice it leaves ample room for the editor to make his own decisions and exercise his own judgment. For instance, are stylistic innovations or interpolations (or omissions) of short fragments related to the *closed* or the *open* tradition? And to what extent must the quantitative, over and above the qualitative, aspect of the given phenomenon be taken into account? Here lie a great many problems that every editor must succeed in dealing with, and their solution gains the more weight, the more and the better the arguments. The solution cannot, however, be based on principles that are immutable, established a priori, and objective. To show how far evaluations can differ and to which degree their difference can influence decisions concerning the textological matter, I refer to the example of the *Azbučna Molitva*, which according to Kuev (and personally I am inclined to agree with him) exists in a single version, while Zykov distinguishes two versions: Kuev establishes a single text, the archetype of the entire tradition; Zykov instead proposes two different texts which do not go back to the same archetype.

Editorial Criteria

Let us now suppose that we have divided the manuscript tradition of a given work into different versions, each represented by a number of copies and marked by a set of variants.

The criterium universally applied in the field of Slavic philology, and the sole regarded as truly scientific, is to edit, as text, a base manuscript which the study of the history of the text has revealed to be closest to the original, correcting its mechanical errors. Truly, a neo-Bédierian criterium.

The polemics between the followers of Lachmann and Bédier, which featured so prominently in the first half of this century, can now be considered largely exhausted. Lachmann's reconstructed editon and Bédier's documentary edition correspond, more than to two opposite criteria, to different solu-

ions conditioned by different aims. The former serves to establish, as far as possible, the text as it was in the lost original; the latter rather serves to document one moment in its tradition which is considered particularly significant, irrespective of the extent to which it agrees with the original. These two completely different views should not be confused with one another.

If the aim of a critical edition is strictly to establish the original aspect of the text, the logical foundations of Lachmann's method (*recensio* and *emendatio*), it seems to me, are without match in adequacy. What is meant by *mechanical errors*? From a theoretical point of view, the concept may seem evident, yet in practice *mechanical errors* can mean either all possible misreadings, or merely the material mistakes of the copyist. Yet it is well known that the latter are not the only to play a role in the copying of manuscripts. Furthermore, the history of the text, which only helps to establish the relations between the various versions of the given work, cannot be called upon to appraise the value of the copies of a certain text. To establish which manuscript should form the base, all copies that belong to a given version must be subject to critical evaluation, i.e. proper *recensio*, without which any judgment is arbitrary or at least leaves a vast margin of error. It is no coincidence that in most cases editors consider the oldest copy the best.

Yet errors alone form only part of the problem. If Lachmann's criterium seems to me to fall short of the innovative tradition of many of our medieval works, it is precisely the concept of *error*, which should be replaced by the concept of *variant*. After all, for some versions it cannot always be established beyond doubt, which of them is correct and which erroneous, which is primary and which secondary. Variants, on the other hand, in relation to the base text can be either insignificant (without value of cultural importance, e.g. purely graphic variants), or indifferent (e.g. certain synonymic or grammatical variants), or substitutive. The former should, I think, be excluded from the apparatus (at least if the number of copies is large, to prevent the apparatus from becoming illegible), the second should be included without commentary, only the latter variants should be given full consideration, and those that appear quite unacceptable should be eliminated from the critical text irrespective of whether they belong to the manuscript chosen as base.

Still, correction is thought to mean contamination of the variants of several copies, which is inadmissible, since every copy represents a certain self-contained, unique and inimitable system. If, so the reasoning goes, we wish to make a correction in the base text, we must envisage not a critical edition,

of which the text must be genuine, but a total reconstruction, which must always remain hypothetical. Here, too, I think, we are faced with a contradiction. After all, if the aim of the edition is to provide a text that maximally approximates the original, the editor is required to eliminate, as far as possible, from the critical text (not the apparatus) the strictly individual deviations of some copyists, which must be relegated to the apparatus.

Some consideration must be given to the distinction of a critical edition, a text which existed and exists in reality, and a reconstruction, a text which is no more than hypothetical. We must, indeed, ask ourselves whether such a distinction is, in fact, possible. Let us consider e.g. the *Slovo o polku Igoreve*: is any of its editions a critical edition or a reconstruction? Or, say, the edition of *Pan Tadeusz* by Górski, who is known to have corrected the text of the edition princeps on the basis of autographs and other sources: is it a critical edition or a reconstruction?

The examples can easily be multiplied indefinitely, in particular because corrections of the base text appear in general to be indispensable and to transcend the inadequate and opaque concept of *mechanical errors*. Thus, barring the *recensio*, the only alternative remains correction *ad libitum* or complete lack of correction. It seems to me then, that in between a reconstruction and a documentation of a certain moment of the tradition, there is no room for a critical edition. This is why the work of an editor becomes tedious and useless, being restricted to the sole compilation of data which, in the end, are left uninterpreted. And the only merit to be recognized in this type of work - of which there are vast numbers in the field of Slavic studies - is that it makes available to the scholarly public certain materials from the manuscript tradition. But genuine philological work starts there, where this type of editions stop. I do concede that at a certain stage in the history of philology *emendatio* was being abused, be it by excessive trust in schematic constructs, be it by improper application of philological criteria. I think that some distance should be kept from such criteria and that extreme caution should be exercised in correcting the base text. But then, the other extreme should be avoided as well, namely to think that an error or some innovation of an ancient copyist would be more important than a modern philologist's *emendatio*. For let us not forget on the other hand, how much profit in the understanding of texts comes precisely from the effort to correct the data of the tradition. Let me refer once more to a text known to us all, the *Slovo o pol-ku Igoreve*: had it not been discussed, interpreted and emended by so

many scholars, whose solutions have for the better part been laid to rest because they were demonstrably wrong, the text would not be more intelligible to us today than it was to the first editors. The motor for progress in science, as is well known, can often be error.

This is not all. The necessity of comprehensive correction of the base text on the basis of the collation of all of its copies is, to my mind, not only practical, but logical well, as far as the aim of an edition is to establish the original text. In that case it is also evident that the critical text cannot be identified with any of the known copies, but must be placed between the set of witnesses and the original in a perspective which becomes the more definite, the better the functions of the copies in the set are established. Hence also the necessity to distinguish between an *open* and a *closed* tradition, in the framework of which our research is not limited to the description of facts, but leads to true knowledge, inevitably and intimately connected with the knowing subject.

These are self-evident and familiar questions. But precisely in the case of textology it is objected that such a procedure cannot be considered *scientific* and *objective*. Perhaps rightly so, if *scientific* is taken as a synonym for *truth*, an absolute value. Yet *scientific* can have another meaning as well, and in no case does *subjective* simply mean *arbitrary*.

It is also claimed that the correction of errors in the base text would be an anti-historic procedure. I beg to differ. Every form of historical knowledge is derived from a set of witnesses (in our case copies), which may neither be neglected nor deliberately falsified; they must rather be interpreted. This is why people continually rewrite their own history, sometimes even when there is no call for a new demonstration of the theory of relativity. What more to say? We are dealing with the antinomy of ἀλήθεια vs. δόξα, *truth* vs. *faith*, known since the time of the ancient philosophers. For philological research - and that is precisely its lesson - like for all the humanities, ἀλήθεια represents the unattainable ideal, beyond even the most scrupulous and systematic endeavour, that can only be approximated. Every edition is to a certain extent conditioned by δόξα, the conviction of the researcher.

The Significance of the Critical Edition

What has been said, leads to some considerations concerning the significance of critical editions.

An edition can be called critical not because it restitutes an established,

canonical, definitive etc. text, but because it makes use of relevant criteria, to be considered valid, until replaced by new and better hypotheses or the discovery of new facts. It is in this sense that the critical edition is a scientific work.

Secondly, a critical edition, like every philological work, is of necessity intimately connected to interpretation. Editorial work is not a science to itself, but a fundamental part of modern literary science. It is only by virtue of critically edited texts that the features of the literary language can be discerned, and only being conscious of those features can one make a choice from among the variants of the copies. Hence the intrinsic need for new and well-researched editions. I should add that under the conditions of alarming stagnation in critical editions of the most important texts of the medieval *Slavia* (just think of the success of phototypical editions), an editor can set himself more modest tasks, aim to eliminate the most glaring traces of the evolution, and make mental emendations or else give all kinds of emendations in the margin of the otherwise untouched base text, as e.g. Samuel Johnson did in his edition of Shakespeare. It is important for an editor to react upon his perception of the text and in one way or other to state the reasons for his choice.

Only in this way can our work escape from the aseptic domain governed by the categoric imperative of *objectivity* and join the vital processus of the history of culture, in which every choice and every decision concerning the history of the work or the tradition of the text is an essential element of that painstaking and dialectic process of cognition, which we try to find in the arts.